

NEW PUBLICATIONS.

SWINBURNE'S NEW BOOK.

A CENTURY OF ROUNDELS. By ALGERON CHARLES SWINBURNE. London: Chatto & Windus. 1883.

It is safe to say that no man whom the world has agreed to consider a great poet has ever offered to his readers a more extraordinary collection of verse than Mr. Swinburne's "Century of Roundels." His "Tristram of Lyonesse, and Other Poems," of last year, contained some of the noblest lines he has ever written. It is true that the Tristram was far too long. We can upon paper after page in which the author abandoned himself to his besetting sin of pouring out his own beautiful words in faultless rhythm, like a flood which overwhelmed us for the moment by its sheer force of movement, but at the end of which we caught ourselves asking, "What is it all about?" and were quite unable to answer our own question. But we could forgive many such sins, when we chanced on a passage like this noble, unforgettable lines:

"They have the night, who had like us the day;
We, whom day finds, shall have the night as they.
From the fitters of the light unbound,
Healed of our wound of living, shall sleep sound.
All gifts but one the jealous God may keep.
From our soul's longing out—no need to sleep.
This though he grude and often chose to prayer,
The grace of the stars, and other chance to spare.
Then though His ear be sealed to all that lived,
Be it lightly given or lightly, God must give.
We, as the men whose name on earth is none,
We too shall surely pass out of the sun.
Out of the sound and sweet light things,
With us the stars, the time, the wandering wings,
Wide of the naked world, and shadowless,
And long-lived as the world's own weariness.
Us, too, when all the fires of time are cold,
The heights shall hide us, and the depths shall hold."

In the "Century of Roundels" we find no such moving eloquence as this, and yet these two recent volumes have in one regard a more than ordinarily close connection. "Tristram of Lyonesse" makes up less than half of the last year's volume; and a large portion of the remainder is devoted to that passion which Mr. Swinburne seems to have substituted for his earlier worship of Venus, namely the love of children.

Unfortunately for his readers Mr. Swinburne is a bachelor, and the only vent for what a philoprogenitrix would call his enormous organ of philoprogenitiveness is in song. Commencing with "Herc," in last year's book, he purveys various infants through thirty-two pages of mostly very poor poetry; and again, later on, returns to his favorite theme in "A Dark Month," a poem of nearly sixty mortal pages, in which he bewails absence from home of a child, understood to be the nephew of his friend Theodore Watts, with whom the poet has for the last few years. To this child Mr. Swinburne seems quite to have surrendered his heart; and no man could mourn the absence of a wife or sweetheart more desparately than our post laureate the world's eclipse, when the beloved small boy went away on a visit. The days of his absence are "thirty-one pale maidens, clad all in mourning dresses." He affirms that he is "divided from heaven, and derided of dreams." He sings of—

"A mouth without sight of the sun,
Rising, or reigning, or setting.
Through days without use of the day.
Who calls it the month of May?
The sense of the name is undone,
And the sound of it fit for forgetting."

And again he cries out:
"As a poor man hungering stands, with insatiate
eyes and hands,
Void of bread,
Right in sight of men that feast, while his famine
with no least
Crumb is fed,
Here, across the garden wall, can I hear strange
children call,
Watch them play,
From the windowed seat above, whence the good-
child I love, is away."

And in the poem at the end of the volume, entitled "Sunrise," he celebrates the return of the same beloved object:

"For the sake of this child, he seems to have taken all children into his heart; as sometimes a man learns to honor all women through loving one. The feeling is commendable, though its results are now and then somewhat ludicrous, as when, for instance, he addresses a poem to W. M. R. and L. R. (William Michael and Lucy Rossetti) on the birth of "Twins,"

"April, on whose wings
All the gladness things,
Like the star that brings
Light to the earth,
All things good to man,
Are his light and day,
Make the month shine, set,
And fair May forget.
Whence her birth began,
Brings, as heart would choose,
Sound of golden news,
Brigit a kindly dew,
Tidings clear as mirth,
Sweet as air and earth
Now that she has birth,
Twice thus blest, of twins!"

And in this fashion he pipes along for thirteen more stanzas.

Of his own especial darling he writes not only in "A Dark Month," but in "Seven Years Old," "Eight Years Old," "A Child's Laughter," "A Child's Thanks," "A Child's Battles," "A Child's Future," and in a poem called "Comparisons," wherein he maintains that no other child ever has been or ever can be like this one. It certainly would require an organ of philoprogenitiveness at least equal to the author's own to carry the reader patiently through all these rhymes.

It is the recurrence of the same frequent theme, the resumption of some of the same histories, in which consists the kinship of "A Century of Roundels," with its predecessor of last year. There, indeed, the family resemblance ends. In "Tristram of Lyonesse" we have pages which only a very great poet could have written, while with very few exceptions, the "Roundels" evince in their author no higher qualities than a remarkable command of rhyme and rhythm.

A book composed only of one particular form of verse needs to be really great in order to attain for this sameness. Shakespeare's sonnets and Mrs. Browning's are in their passionate force and splendor, their own defence against any charge of monotony; but there are singularly few of these Roundels that it would give us any pleasure higher than amusement to read again. Amusing they certainly are, as we shall presently discover. Here and there, of course, we come upon a fine epitome or a noble stanza, but what shall we say of verses like this:

"Hope nor fear can avail to stay
Waves that whiten on wrecks that wallow,
Times and seasons that wane and slay."
Or this:

"One thought lies close in her heart, guawn thorough,
Worn, a weed in a dried-up river,
A rust-red share in an empty furrow?"

Among the best of the Roundels are the one entitled "In Sark," and the eight "In Guernesey," addressed to Theodore Watts, who last year shared Mr. Swinburne's holiday journey to his beloved Channel Islands. In one of these Guernesey Roundels we catch an echo of the poet's old exultant passion for the sea, in this fine stanza:

"My heart springs first and plunges, ere my hand
Strike out from shore: more close it brings to me,
More near and dear than seems my fatherland,
My mother's sea."

"Ventimiglia" is, as a whole, so picturesque that it would be an injustice not to quote it:

"The sky and sea glances hard and bright and bleak:
Down the one steep street, with slow steps firm and free,
A tall girl paced, with eyes too proud to think
The sky and sea."

"One dead flat sapphire, void of wrath or glee,
Through bay on bay shone blind from bank to bank
The weary Mediterranean, drear to see."

"More deep than living shore her eyes that drank,
The briny brine, and shed again on me,
Till pale before their splendor waned and shrank
The sky and sea."

Of the large portion of this book devoted to "Moby-Dick" it is not too much to say that there are few so grandiose as to be found, even among those whose especial purpose is to provoke laughter. Of "Moby-Dick" in general Mr. Swinburne thus sings:

"A boy abhors as bright,
If winter or if May be,
In eyes that keep in sight
A baby."

"Though dark the skies or grey be,
It fills our eyes with light,
If midnight or mid-day be."

"Love hails it day and night,
The sweetest thing that may be,
Yet cannot praise aright
A baby."

One of the Rossetti twins has died, since last year's volume was published—and the poet devotes nine or ten Roundels to this event. Recalling his song of welcome, he says:

"Two years since was love's light song mistaken,
Blessing then both blossoms, half in vain;
Night, outspreading light, hath overtaken
One of twin."

Baving duly lauded the untimely taking off of the twin, the poet strikes a more lively chord, and gives us Roundels on "A Baby's Feet," "A Baby's Eyes," and "A Baby's Hands," which a

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R. E. SWINBURNE ought to be allowed to give us his own notion of what a Roundel is, which he thus sets forth:

"A Roundel is wrought as a ring or a starbright sphere,
With craft of delight and with cunning of sound unsought.

That the heart of the healer may smile if to please—
A roundel is wrought."

Perhaps Mr. Swinburne ought to be allowed to give us his own notion of what a Roundel is, which he thus sets forth:

"A Roundel is wrought as a ring or a starbright sphere,
With craft of delight and with cunning of sound unsought.

That the heart of the healer may smile if to please—
A roundel is wrought."

Its jewel of music is earl of ill or of aught—
Love, laughter, or mourning—memorance of rapts or tears—

"As a bird's quick song runs round, and the hearts in us hear
Pause answer to pause, and again the same strain caught:

So moves the device whence round as a pearl or a tear,
A roundel is wrought."

Perhaps it would not be too much to admit that the poet has certainly very largely succeeded in making the heart of the healer smile, when a roundel is wrought.

The volume is dedicated to Christina G. Rossetti, in a tolerably good Roundel; and the "Envoy" at the end of the book commends these slight songs to the reader thus:

"Fly, white butterflies, out to sea,
Frail, pale wings for the winds to try,
Small white wings, that we scarce can see,
Fly."

"Here and there may a chance-caught eye
Note in a score of you twain or three
Brighter or darker of tinge or dye,
All to the haven where each would be.
Fly."

When credit has been given to Mr. Swinburne for the skill with which he pursues the difficult rhymes of the Roundel through a hundred pages, for a few charming poems, and for many fine lines and happy epithets scattered here and there, the fact remains that the book will not add to his fame; and while a quarter of the Roundels would have delighted us had we chanced on them in some more miscellaneous volume, the other three-quarters seem to have little excuse for being. It is a sad fact that Mr. Swinburne is writing too much. Some of his former occupations are gone. His present life is excluded, and his masterly command of rhyme and rhythm tempts him to write, when no muse has whispered in his ear, things for which a speedy oblivion is the best fate which can be invoked.

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